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THE PRACTICAL METHODS

OF

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

OF

RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLE

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MINDS OF CHILDREN.

BEING THE REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION TO THE GENERAL CONVENTION OF THE NEW CHURCH, 1864.

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REPORT

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION.

The Committee on Religious Instruction respectfully report, that they have held two meetings during the past year, to make arrangements for the more efficient performance of their duties, the fruits of which they hope to present in due time.

In the present report it is proposed to bring forward some views, believed to be in accordance with the doctrines and spirit of the New Church, on *The Practical Methods of Laying the Foundation of Religious Principle in the Minds of Children.*

We are constantly taught in the writings of Swedenborg, that it is essential to the salvation of man that he shun evils and do good *from religious principle.*

Swedenborg says that the only difference between a spiritual man and a natural man—between a man whose thoughts and affections centre in the Lord and the neighbor, and one who loves only himself and the world—is that "The spiritual man believes in a Divine Being, and acts sincerely and justly, not merely because it is according to civil and moral laws, but also because it is according to Divine laws;" and it is added,—"The spiritual man, inasmuch as he thinks about Divine things when he

acts, communicates with the angels of heaven; and as far as he does this he is conjoined with them."

If it be essential to the spiritual welfare of men, that they act from religious principle, it is of the highest importance that when the habits and motives of action are forming, the teachings of the Lord be held constantly before the mind as the guide and test of right and wrong.

It is scarcely more difficult for a child to think, "This ought to be done, or ought not to be done, because my Heavenly Father says so," than to think, "My father will be pleased or displeased if I do it." True, the child knows his earthly parent before he can think of the Lord. Sensual impressions are made first; and ideas abstracted from material things come afterwards. But at a very early age—almost as soon as children can talk—they can begin to have some idea of the Lord; they can know that there is some one whom their parents worship and obey. And if parents humbly place themselves in their true position, the children will learn, almost from the beginning, to regard them as representatives of the Lord: all the impressions received from them will be open to the Lord; and the children, in obeying them, will be trained to heavenly life.

In order that this may be so, it is essential for those who have charge of children to remember that the laws of right and wrong are from the Lord. No artificial standard must be set up, derived from one's own habits or tastes; but all the rules which the child is required to obey must be derived from, and referred to, the Word of the Lord.

There are many faults to which children are liable, which are evidently and directly forbidden by the Commandments,—such as taking what belongs to others, speak-

ing what is untrue, and making light of the Lord's name. There are many others which fall under the general law, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself;" from which law should be deduced those rules of order which make it possible for children to work or play together. These precepts, obeyed because the Lord commands them, form a spiritual mind open to the Lord. But there are very many trifling conventionalities—matters of form, changing from time to time with varying opinions, circumstances and tastes — which ought not to be ranked and insisted upon as duties, but which, with proper explanations as to their use, may advantageously be left to the free will of the child. They worship the Lord in vain, who teach for doctrines the commandments of men; and they in vain attempt to bring their children to the Lord, who guide them by the same fallible rules.

Another important principle of government is, that as the laws of right and wrong are of the Lord, offences against them ought to be corrected as offences against Him. The selfish love of rule, which is natural to every one, arrogating to itself the law, regards violations of it as personal offences against *us*, rebuking them sharply and angrily, as if we were aggrieved. And the effect of such rebuke is to excite the natural self-will of the child in opposition to us and to the truth: whereas, if we treated the fault as breaking a law which we respect as much as we desire the child to respect it, and require obedience to it from love to the Lord and reverence for His laws, the reverence and docility of the child will be awakened, and he will grieve with us at his offence.

There is an immense difference, in origin, character, and effects, between the discipline of children as conducted by the natural selfishness, and their education by love to

the Lord and the neighbor. The unregenerate man is interiorly full of evil lusts and thoughts; though exteriorly, from fear of evil consequences to himself, he is a good civil and moral member of society. He treats his children as he does himself. For the sake of appearances he represses their evils; at first, by fear of punishment; and afterwards, as the children mature, by his own motives—the love of reputation, honor, or gain. He himself loves evil, thinks it, and, in the other world, where deceitful appearances are of no avail, will do it. His children, controlled, while under his immediate supervision, by the fear of punishment, are constantly watching for opportunities to do what is forbidden. The whole tendency of their education is to make them like their parent—externally good and internally evil.

The spiritual man, on the other hand, laboring to subdue his own natural evils, and to live from the Lord, is principally anxious to cultivate the independent self-control and spiritual strength of his children. In his view the children are not parts of himself, with whom he is at liberty to be angry when they displease him, and indulgent when they please him. They are the children of the same Heavenly Father, intrusted to his care in their early life, for mutual benefit; that their innocence may keep his heart open and childlike, and in return may be made strong and wise through his care and instruction.

The children of Israel were a nation of sensual men, who hardly concealed their desire for evil, and were kept in the low degree of merely external order which they attained only by the constant fear of punishment. Of course they treated their children in a similar manner, and the rod was their great means of discipline. What a marvel it must have been to the disciples, to see their

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in the minds of Children.
Report of Committee of New Church.
Boston 1864.

Lord and Master take the despised little creatures, whom they had thrust away, in His arms, and bless them! to hear Him say, "Of such is the kingdom of heaven"! and, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven"! Not yet has the full force of this example been appreciated. Not yet do Christians give to children their place as independent human beings in the sight of the Lord; human beings, too, in some essential respects, nearer to Him than any others.

But, while the good of childhood holds this exalted place in human goodness, we are never likely to lose sight, in practice, of the faults of childhood. Children *always* have faults, just as men do. Every day brings to them, as to us, its full work. And, because their rational powers are not developed, they cannot of themselves distinguish good from evil; neither have they the power, unaided, to change their state. Men and women can go to the Lord immediately, through their own rationality, and get strength from Him to deliver them from evil. But children, when they fall into evil, need the help of their parents' reason to lift them out, and lead them to the Lord.

When a new evil appears in a child—and, one by one, they will be constantly appearing—it is the parents' duty to prevent it from coming out into wicked acts, but especially to instruct him concerning it, to show him the evil of it, to teach him the precepts of the Lord in relation to it, and by every means to encourage and strengthen him to work against it, and, with the help of the Lord, to overcome it in himself. External restraint and punishment—the ready instruments of indolence and selfishness—are necessary only when internal means fail, and as far as

they fail. And, even when necessary, punishment should never be arbitrary either in kind or degree, but as far as possible the natural effects of the fault, and ceasing when the only possible good effect of punishment—repentance for the past and good intent for the future—is attained.

It will occur to every one, in attempting to carry these principles into practice, that the Christian rule of discipline (Matt. xviii. 15-17,) is the rule for children as well as for adults. The object in both cases is the same—to strengthen the good till it is able to overcome the evil. Open, sharp reproof begets in both the same spirit of irritability and resistance; and patience and self-control have at least equal power over children as over adults, to quiet the storm, and bring a calm state receptive of instruction. A harsh rebuke may be administered twenty times a day, and twenty times pass unheeded, if not in the presence of the parent, then in his absence; but a gentle appeal when the child is alone and his feelings quiet, may do the whole work. And then it will be done, not only in appearance, but in reality—not by the fear of punishment which controls the hells, but by the love of right which rules the heavens.

Thus may children be introduced into the practical life of the Church, and parents and children together into the tenderest Christian brotherhood, and all be children in the sight of the Lord.

JOSEPH PETTEE,
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T. B. HAYWARD,
JOHN WORCESTER,
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